



The Delta:

The Challenge of Leading Extraordinary People to Do Ordinary Things

By Colonel Adam S. Roth

When we speak of those who are decorated for bravery or heroism, a frequent comment is that they were ordinary people doing extraordinary things. As the current wars wind down, we have grown a force that is—without reservation—the most combat-proven force in generations. These were volunteers who came forward and served in a time of war. They were frequently placed in positions where life or death decisions had to be made immediately; and frequently, the results were stellar. This is the force we have today. They are Soldiers who expect to be

treated as adults, having had that responsibility in theater and having gained life experience during deployment. But how do you get Soldiers who have been slaying dragons for a year to now set their sights on smaller targets and do ordinary things—and *want* to do them?

While serving at the U.S. Army Engineer School, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, I regularly conduct outbriefings with U.S. Army Reserve students as part of their Engineer Basic Officer Course. I start out with a simple question: What is it that you haven't learned during the course,

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE APR 2012		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2012 to 00-00-2012	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Delta: The Challenge of Leading Extraordinary People to Do Ordinary Things				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Army Engineer School,Engineer Professional Bulletin,464 MANSCEB Bldg 3201 Ste 2661,Fort Leonard Wood,MO,65473				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 3	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

“This is the force we have today. . . . having had that responsibility in theater and having gained life experience during deployment. But how do you get Soldiers who have been slaying dragons for a year to now set their sights on smaller targets and do ordinary things—and want to do them?”

but want to? Almost invariably I get the same set of topics that includes—

- Counseling.
- Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Reports (NCOERs).
- Officer Evaluation Reports.
- Command Supply Discipline Program.
- Command Maintenance Discipline Program.

Although it is not a doctrinally correct term, the lost art of “garrison leadership” is the locus of those topics. Growing up as a lieutenant in Germany, many of these topics occurred with regularity and created stability and predictability for the Soldiers of U.S. Army Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan terminate or decrease in scope, white space appears more frequently on training schedules. The patch chart, though vitally important for driving operational tempo for the past 10 years, will no longer be the sole driver of training. The next generation of leaders may not start their lieutenant years on an operational deployment, but rather learn to master the art of garrison leadership while having time on their hands to focus on ordinary things. This article focuses on training that supports that end—the mastery of garrison leadership. It is our collective challenge to take these extraordinary Soldiers and make them want to do the ordinary things that comprise garrison leadership tasks.

Counseling

I cannot overstate the importance of counseling at every level. In units where I have served, leaders have often been frustrated with individual Soldiers. When I ask the leaders if they have counseled the Soldiers or documented their performance, the usual answer is that they have never had the time. When I dig further down, I usually see that they have never really understood **how** to counsel Soldiers. My first exposure to counseling was at the Infantry Officer Basic Course in 1988, where we conducted role-playing with real Soldiers. The quality and realism of that training were so vivid that when I met the instructor again recently, we could recall word for word what was said 23 years ago. Whether using a Department of the Army (DA) Form 4856, *Developmental Counseling Form*,¹ or an informal document of your own creation, you need to take the time to establish

expectations and standards with each subordinate in your organization. If you can quantify those expectations and standards, so much the better.

The other step in the process, sometimes overlooked, is to truly listen to what subordinates say, get their perspective on what was said, and discover what their personal goals are. While conducting counseling sessions with students at the Engineer School, I am frequently amazed at their reaction to having a senior leader sit down, one on one, to discuss their careers, dreams, and issues. Taking the time for these sessions has been a personal priority for me, and I hope that the result will be a generation of junior leaders who will do the same with their subordinates. In order to grow our next generation of leaders, this sort of hands-on career management is probably one of our most solemn duties.

NCOERs

As a battalion commander, I often saw substandard NCOERs. Sometimes they were simply a cut and paste from the last noncommissioned officer (NCO) who was rated. On my last deployment, we took the opportunity to conduct a 2-day workshop on a litany of topics, to include NCOERs. Under the direction of the battalion command sergeant major, we trained more than 200 NCOs during the deployment, and the resulting NCOERs improved markedly. The key points of completing good NCOERs come back to counseling, setting realistic goals with appropriate metrics, and getting feedback. The rater and the rated NCO need to ensure that the duty description is meaningful and includes details such as the number of people supervised and the value of equipment for which the NCO is signed. The rater and senior rater also need to know the correct career progression for the NCO. Do they have DA Pamphlet 600-25, *U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide*,² open in front of them to see logical future positions for the NCO and to determine what key and developmental positions are available; or are they simply writing in “squad leader” or “platoon sergeant” as recommendations? Finally, counseling and final NCOERs need to be done on a timely basis. If a final NCOER is late, the leader has failed the Soldier and the Army. If proper NCOER procedures are not part of the culture in your unit and you’re not tracking such ordinary things at your level, there will be harmful consequences. Only you, the leader, can change this situation.

Officer Evaluation Reports

The bedrock of this process is DA Form 67-9-1, *Officer Evaluation Report Support Form*.³ Though some changes to the form are coming, including the return of a block check for senior raters other than field grade officers, the concept and importance of this form will remain the same. The first instinct for any officer when meeting the new boss should be to leave that meeting with a copy of the Officer Evaluation Report Support Form. It is not infrequent that a rater, especially in the Reserve Components, does not have a copy of the form available. The rated officer should nonetheless prepare a support form for feedback. This document serves as a sort of contract between the rated officer and the rater and as a blueprint for how the leader will measure the performance of the subordinate. Raters and senior raters must develop attainable metrics to gauge that performance. The metrics should include not just easily quantifiable things, such as the number of Soldiers who have undergone urinalysis, but also harder ones, such as the development of a training plan that materially contributes to the improvement of the unit's rating on the unit status report. Finally, it is crucial that leaders provide their officers—especially the most junior officers—with quality feedback. The impact of corrective or reinforcing counseling is the biggest combat multiplier that I have experienced, and time is the only cost for this ordinary task.

Command Supply Discipline Program

This is critical to our success as leaders, especially as equipment and supplies stop flowing as freely as they have for the past 10 years. Leaders will have to regularly account for what they have, to show due diligence, and to avoid that signature wound inflicted on commanders by the current wars—the financial liability investigation of property loss. Leaders will need to know what constitutes an end item; what the components of that end item are; what basic issue items come with it; and what sets, kits, and outfits are involved. Whether a commander decides to perform 10 percent inventories monthly or 25 percent inventories quarterly, the creative leader should see this as a training opportunity for subordinates and thereby renew the lost skills of garrison leadership.

Command Maintenance Discipline Program

Especially important in mechanized or wheeled vehicle units, this program should be bread and butter for leaders. Regular Monday morning *motor stables* were a staple of existence in U.S. Army Europe. But there were other staples too, including mileage restrictions that prohibited the use of tracked vehicles for more than 800 miles—in an entire year. Leaders should be in the motor pool with their Soldiers. If they have vehicles assigned to them, they should also participate in the normal preventive maintenance checks and services process for the vehicle. The fact that many of the vehicles we have operated in the

past 10 years have been maintained by contract workers has created a divide between Soldiers and their equipment.

But maintenance is not only about automotive equipment. When is the last time your Soldiers pulled good preventive maintenance on their weapons; communication equipment (to include radio checks with a company or battalion tactical operations center); or their chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear protective gear? Leaders need to know how to do these tasks, demonstrate their leadership through their physical presence in the mud with their Soldiers when they pull a drive sprocket on a Bradley fighting vehicle in the mud, and use these ordinary things as training vehicles to teach the next generation of Soldiers.

It is not my intention to turn back the clock to an Army that will never be again. It is, however, imperative to recognize that the muscle memory from some of those skills, learned so long ago, have atrophied. Before many of the senior leaders who started during the Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm era retire, it is imperative to renew those garrison leadership skills for leaders who weren't even born in a time when there were two Germanys. Our Soldiers, our Army, and our Nation deserve nothing less.



Endnotes:

¹DA Form 4856, *Developmental Counseling Form*, August 2010.

²DA Pamphlet 600-25, *U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide*, 28 July 2008.

³DA Form 67-9-1, *Officer Evaluation Report Support Form*, October 2011.

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